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ABSTRACT

Skills and knowledge developed by undergraduate study of the humanities and the application of these skills to business careers are discussed. The humanities are chiefly verbal disciplines and offer vital career preparation wherever communication and human relations are important. The scrutiny of students' writing, which occurs in humanities courses, develops skills in logic, precision of expression, and the ability to persuade. Humanities studies, which include English and history, help students learn about how people act and think. Humanities majors not only develop skills in writing but also in reading. Humanities graduates have skills that are valuable to a range of unspecialized jobs (management, public relations, personnel, communications). Liberal arts colleges should find out about job opportunities and create more ties with diverse employers. Insufficient concern for introductory humanities courses by colleges and narrow teaching of advanced courses are criticized. Specific reference is made to issues concerning the study of English. Reasons that keep business from turning to the humanities to find their employees are largely related to the identification of subject matters in the university, the established relationships between college and business, and routes of access by which students move to business careers. (SW)

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Developing Marketable Skills in the Humanities

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Summary

The assumption that the humanities, more broadly the liberal arts, develop no skills useful to business is erroneous. The humanities are chiefly verbal disciplines and therefore offer vital career preparation wherever communication and human relations are important. More specifically, the humanities tend to attract students skilled in the use of words, offer tutoring in the specific skills of writing, develop through exposure to literature a sensitivity to words and to human beings, foster thought couched in human terms and verbal concepts, and develop reading skills and language skills vital to further learning.

There are simple reasons that keep businesses from turning to the humanities to find their employees, most of them related to the identification and specialization of subject matters in the university, the established relationships between higher education and business, and routes of access by which students move to business careers. In these respects, much might be done to develop better relationships between the humanities and business.

The teaching of the humanities, however, raises important questions about university teaching and research not only drifting away from the world of business but from its own central human concerns. Introductory courses are neglected, values are shaped by the graduate school and its preoccupation with highly specialized research, and literature is currently bent to fit critical systems which at worst have literature feeding upon itself.

The present may be a good time to develop greater understanding between humanities professors and business employers. The anxieties of students over jobs may have the effect of bringing humanities professors back to essential human concerns. At the same time, business employers interested in employing humanities graduates may need to look to enhancing the satisfactions that can come from such work.

If there is one lesson humanistic studies might teach, it is that the fact of being human powerfully conditions whatever we do. The second lesson follows closely on that: that the language we use powerfully represents us as human beings. In those two possibilities--actualities wherever the humanities are taught well--lie the chief potential for linking the education of humanists with business careers. What does business management need more than the sensitive recognition of what human beings are, how they are motivated, encouraged, energized, frustrated, intimidated, turned off, in short, how they function with other human beings? And what is more important to these central facts of administration and management than the words which accompany acts which shape relationships, define terms, persuade others, and the like?

The issues to be faced in this conference include a number that fall within my province as a teacher of humanities and father and citizen concerned with young people (three of my own flesh and blood) finding satisfying work. These are: "What are the skills and knowledge developed by undergraduate study in the humanities?" "What are the competencies needed for employment in business?" "What barriers exist to successful employment of humanities graduates?" "How can these ideas be shared effectively with students, parents, and counselors making decisions about higher education?"

Most of my remarks will be addressed to the first question, for as much as I think humanities departments--English is my particular one--should be acquainted with the business world into which many of their majors emerge, I have never been able to maintain for myself or my department a very close acquaintance. From experience as an administrator inside and outside the university, I think I know something about competencies expected of business administrators and about some of the barriers that separate humanities graduates from business employment.

I will begin with quoting from a copy of a speech that came across my desk today. The occasion was a forum sponsored by the AAHE in Seattle bringing a wide variety of business and community figures and educators together to discuss higher education. The speaker, an executive for the Weyerhaeuser corporation, said:

"We need managers who can think clearly, write grammatically, communicate in complete concise sentences and develop logical concepts. White collar productivity, a slippery issue at best, would certainly be advanced light years in the opinion of our leaders if it were not necessary to read important memos and papers from department-level managers three or four times to discover what they are trying to say."

With that endorsement from the business side, it is only necessary to emphasize that the humanities are and will continue to be verbal disciplines. We humanists can properly claim that those students majoring in the humanities read better and write better than those who don't, and this includes those current multitudes in the business schools. We are not bragging, for the simple fact is that students tend to opt for what they do well. Those who come into the humanities and succeed are likely to have a greater verbal facility initially than those who don't. One recent study of how writing skills develop concludes that the chief characteristic of past education and circumstance which differentiates college students who write well from those who don't is that the good writers come from backgrounds in which reading was done for pleasure. It follows that if we humanists would further develop these skills of reading and writing we do so by continuing to make them exciting and pleasurable. If a business prizes clear and accurate communication--and more than that--communication that proceeds from a sensitivity to the persons being addressed and succeeds in its ability to move as well as inform--then looking toward humanities graduates is a good bet.

Second, humanists do a good deal of identifying and measuring of the skills that go into writing, more, certainly, than do other broad disciplines in the university. To be sure, we do not do this always or strictly in quantitative terms, nor do we rely on machine-scored tests and true-false questioning. We do, however, give essay tests, assign papers and read them carefully, and both require and respect writing. Where we do our job well, we identify faulty logic, wrong words, and vague terms as well as point out effective tone, arresting turns of phrase, a well-organized page or paragraph. The scrutiny of students' writing is an identification of skills businesses should prize: command of logic, precision of expression, carefulness in composition, ability to persuade, and even correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. Sometimes we do too much of this

naming of parts that constitute the complex and integral acts of writing and thinking. We perpetuate stereotypes of English teachers as only interested in commas and historians in dates. To be sure, we are interested, and business people are interested, in having words spelled right and dates accurately put down. But, not only do humanists develop and measure simple specific skills important to business success; we also stress the even greater importance of dealing with words integrally, responsibly, and beyond their cognitive meaning.

Third, in most of the disciplines within the humanities, words have not become mere symbols nor has language become an artificial code disconnected from the human beings who create language. Properly taught, humanists do not traffic in areas and fields but keep close to farmers plowing stony ground, close to human acts and responses which are also a central concern of most businesses. Indirectly, but certainly, English majors gain experience in dealing with people because most of what they read and think about is about people, both what they do and what makes them do it. Similarly, the historian thinks in terms of what people have done over time and in relation to its effect upon other people. Learning to write well within the humanities, then, is learning about how people act and think, live and have lived.

Fourth, all of this training in words has much to do with thinking, a skill that should have high utility for most occupations. I do not even claim that the humanities have a corner on fostering thought, but I will claim that thinking has a distinctive character in the humanities that might be of particular interest to business. That is, thought in the humanities is not, as in mathematics, chastened by its proceeding through systems of abstract notation, but rather allowed to, encouraged to, range as wide as words allow. Whether in an act of comprehending or in expressing, such thought is quite at odds with the supposedly vague musings of poets, is both precise and hard. Precise because it must be exact if it is to understand or explain the variety and complexity of human situations; hard because it cannot operate within one category of words and ideas, but must find its categories for all those encompassed by human lives and expressed in fiction or history or philosophy or oratory. Both precise and hard as learning a foreign language is, and thus suggesting to

a prospective employer that a good French major may possess important job skills quite apart from expanding trade in Cameroon.

Fifth, humanities majors not only develop skills in writing but in reading. The written word still remains a chief carrier of information in our society whether it appears within a paper text or on a computer screen. The point is obvious as regards hiring people who read well, even though their specific training includes little about the business they work for. What cannot be learned by a person who reads well and is inclined to do it? Similarly, the interest in language itself has already made numbers of humanities majors highly trainable in computer languages and programming.

This, in brief, is the case for the humanities being able to provide students with business skills. My argument thus far is that it is not an absence of specific skills nor the humanist's inability to identify them in behavioral terms that creates and maintains a distance between graduates in the humanities and business employers. There are simpler reasons, which I will mention here before going on to look at the teaching of the humanities more critically.

The first reason affirms again the importance of words. The "humanities" are neither precisely defined nor firmly agreed upon within the university. They are usually placed within the "liberal arts" and perhaps chiefly identified by appearing to have no specific vocational ends. I have defined them in this paper as primarily verbal disciplines, but I am aware that this may slight all that is "humanistic" in both the Fine Arts and the Liberal Arts. (The "humanities" and "liberal arts" are used somewhat interchangeably in my discussion.) Given this difficulty in terminology within academia, the business community has a reason in itself for primarily seeking its employees in the Colleges of Business. Moreover, the business world has no great number of establishments that correspond with academic departments in the humanities. If there were large numbers of Humanities Corporations or Liberal Arts Industries or Philosophic counterparts of Silicon Valley, their hiring executives would certainly go first to the Colleges of Liberal Arts. Inescapable facts stand behind these words. The direct and specialized needs of many employers rule out not just liberal arts majors but all those other specialized majors that don't fit a particular specialized need. A chemical engineering firm,

at the point of chemistry, has no choice but to find its employees among chemical engineers, not among historians or electrical engineers. In addition, Colleges of Business maintain closer ties with the business world than do Liberal Arts Colleges; professors of law and medicine have closer relationships with practicing lawyers and doctors than do professors of philosophy. Formal programs tailored to certain kinds of business employment, career placement services, established patterns of recruiting and interviewing--all these exist in Colleges of Business as means of access little available to the graduate of the Liberal Arts College.

Given these realities, the studies at AT&T which disclose large numbers of managers with liberal arts backgrounds may seem surprising. But considering the size and functioning of such large corporations, it is not surprising at all. As Charles Brown pointed out, probably half of the positions with AT&T do not require highly specialized expertise. "Business" is a broad category for a vast number of jobs favoring those whose interest is business but embracing great numbers whose college major is in one of the liberal arts.

Some things might be done--are being done--to improve directly relationships between humanities graduates and business careers. "English" majors might be perceived as more employable by business if they had degrees in Language and Literature, or, if plain speech were acceptable either to professors or business executives, in Reading and Writing. If we are not likely to create Humanities Industries, then we might expand the market for humanities graduates in existing businesses by recognizing their potential worth in the range of unspecialized jobs--management, marketing, public relations, personnel, communications--which exist in large and small business organizations. All liberal arts departments could do more to find out about job opportunities outside academia, create more ties with diverse employers to create new job categories that could serve both liberal arts and business. Liberal Arts Colleges could also woo corporate recruiters, could do more to make work and study complementary activities. And even closer at hand, humanities professors and faculties of business schools could work together to incorporate more of the humanities in the Colleges of Business. Above all, graduate work in the humanities could give up its attachment to vocational education for

scarce academic jobs and encourage a broad and humane learning which, if it did not have specific jobs at the end, at least would not so narrow the possibilities. Departments of the humanities are just beginning to realize the potential of graduate work in the humanities, not as a step to a Ph. D. in one of its disciplines, but as part of the continuing liberal education of the citizenry, a majority of whom probably earn their living in one business capacity or another. By now, more than sixty colleges and universities have M.A. programs in General or Liberal Studies.

I think these facts of academic and business life best explain the lack of fit between liberal arts education and business careers. But I will not pretend that the teaching of the humanities in colleges and universities is squarely aimed at teaching students to read and write and think. Here I will forego my own criticisms of the humanities for those of Wayne Booth, outgoing president of the Modern Language Association, the largest disciplinary association with the humanities. Speaking at this year's national meeting, Professor Booth called the neglect of introductory courses in the humanities a "scandal." In such courses, he said, most people in our society "have their last chance to learn the joys and uses of critical understanding...The great public fears or despises us because we hire a vast array of underpaid flunkies to teach these so-called service courses so that we can gladly teach, in our advanced courses, those precious souls who survive the gauntlet." "We have," he went on, "compounded the felony by providing for those beginner teachers no orientation, little or no in-service supervision or exchange with experienced teachers, and no hope for any recognition of a job well done." At the same time, he charged, the research in which scholars immerse themselves is becoming increasingly inaccessible, presenting another obstacle to public appreciation of scholarship. Ruled by self-interest and false ideals of scholarship, English faculties neglect the primary task: "to lead all students from passive acceptance of the words that flow over them to critical understanding of those words."

The neglect of introductory classes prevails in every part of the university, despite the simplest of facts that the lifeblood of any discipline is the stream of students who flow into the university as freshmen. In all the current concern for the shortage of teachers of mathematics and science, few faculty voices point

out how much the neglect of undergraduate introductory courses may be a partial cause for great numbers of students opting out of these disciplines or never opting in. In humanities disciplines other than English, the basic condition described by Professor Booth also exists: a turning away from the liberating, humane centers of the disciplines into the graduate school preoccupations of specialists. The reasons are complex but identifiable in the rough: a passion for quantification and the presumed methodologies of science; the regarding of knowledge as a commodity; the value system that motivates professors; the educational pecking order with the graduate school at the top and the elementary school at the bottom; the fetish for published research. Not until some real transformation takes place are we likely to see the humanities flourish in a humane way or for any subject matter study to flourish except as it moves to narrowly viewed ends.

As the teaching of introductory courses is neglected, so is the teaching of advanced courses often narrow and misdirected. Quite contrary to the notion that courses which prepare undergraduate majors in the humanities are non-vocational, unattached to any conceivable career, they are often too expressly vocational, too attached to a very limited conception of a career. Departments inside and outside the humanities have become isolated and professionalized. The guiding principle that shapes curriculum, teaching, deployment of faculty, values, and even social life is too often that every good major is headed for a Ph.D. The poor majors are culled out, left to scramble for business and other jobs, if businesses will accept them.

Let me be more precise about my own discipline, English. In the past, the study of English at the upper-division was often criticized for requiring students to absorb bodies of information of no conceivable use except to other scholars. This kind of study of literature gave way thirty or more years ago to the critical study of texts, and in doing so, restored reading and writing as central concerns. But under the pressures of academization, reading and writing themselves have become esoteric concerns, to be approached through a highly specialized vocabulary, a body of theory formidable more in density of expression than of thought. In a book called Literature Against Itself- Gerald Graff has described literature feeding upon itself rather than being fed by the living world out of which it comes. To some degree, I think, this condition exists within other humanistic disciplines, with

Linguistic Analysis in Philosophy, Quantification in History, Communications Research and Technology in Speech.

In the classroom, the current fashion is to bend the literature under study to the contours of one or another systems created and promulgated by advanced study. Structuralism and Post-Structuralism are the leading systems, the more attractive to American intellectuals because of their European roots. To be sure, the presence of common sense and the actualities of confronting students temper the impact that theorizing has upon actual teaching practices. But, the scramble for academic positions during the last decade has increased the pressure to do research and encouraged the tendency of professors to impose specialized research and its techniques on the undergraduate courses they are constrained to teach. A few years ago, The Chronicle of Higher Education (May 28, 1974) published a letter of complaint from a parent to a college president citing a specific final exam given in an introductory philosophy course. "There are seven questions in this final exam," he wrote, "and five of them deal with Kant. In an introductory course covering approximately 2,500 years of philosophy, how can anyone consider this test to be valid?...My daughter had a positive attitude toward philosophy when she began the course, but Professor ---- has succeeded in turning her off." If the university has difficulty in getting professors to see their courses even within the contexts of their discipline, how much more difficult to broaden their perspectives to see their courses in contexts useful to business. Interdisciplinary courses and programs of study, never easy to maintain, have harder going now than they did in the less disciplinary-bound curricula of the sixties.

I reserve a separate paragraph for the distrust of values that characterizes professional studies in the humanities. The temptation is great in universities where the objective methods of science dominate to seek scientific impeccability in every other discipline that would climb higher in the pecking order. The preoccupation with research without regard for its harm or benefits is one result; the rejection of values is another. I still rankle over the memory of a young colleague who said, "You mean you teach King Lear as a lesson in how children should treat their parents?" "No," I answered, "but if I didn't teach it as if I thought

how children and parents treat each other were important, I would consider myself false to Shakespeare's intent as to my own sense of teaching literature." For the humanities are as centrally concerned with the values that sustain individuals and societies as, say, civil engineering is with the materials that hold up highways and bridges.

The values that sustain a good society are not that different for business people and academics. Members of that society will meet on the common ground of their humanity and in the common interest of enlarging human understanding and increasing human intercourse. That society will not be altogether preoccupied with things, material acquisition, but neither will it be wholly turned to thought and idea. Those who incline one way will still agree with those who incline another that satisfying work is necessary for a good life, notwithstanding differences of opinions about what constitutes a good life. What would be most discouraging to creating a good society would be if both those educating the young and those providing employment stopped considering what a good society is. Thus, once again, the importance of providing human beings with the use of words by which they can participate fully in the necessary human discourse by which our separate notions of a good society and satisfying work are upheld and reconciled.

The topic of this convention is one of the most durable topics in higher education. I still have an offprint of Ernest Earnest's article of 1944, called "Even AB's Must Eat." A monograph series which I edit has as its Sixth Number, Spring 1981, Liberal Learning and Careers. Even as I am writing I come from reading Edwin Delattre's Point of View piece in the Chronicle of Higher Education, January 5, 1983, "Real Career Education Comes From the Liberal Arts." The common theme of these pieces is that getting a liberal education and doing useful work are not that far apart. I have said here that such practical matters as labels and categories, routes of access, acquaintanceship and association separate humanities majors from business employers more than do unshakable prejudices or even reasoned differences of outlook.

As to what might be done to arrive at a more mutually beneficial relationship, I have already mentioned many specific ways in which those who teach in the humanities might better prepare students for business

careers. Most of all, I am concerned with offsetting the effects of specialization and departmental autonomy which both unfairly label students and ill serve liberal education and careers. Just this past week, a student at my university asked me to sponsor her program for a Bachelor of University Studies degree. It was an admirable program supported by a clear statement of purpose, that of preparing her to enter a business career in management and administration. In the seventy hours allotted to the major, she had chosen courses in writing and literature, in communications outside the English department, in business subjects including accounting, in computer science, and in social psychology. Unfortunately, the Bachelor of University Studies operates outside the dominant departmental framework on our campus and is regarded by many faculty as one more unsound idea of the sixties. More promising are the various programs described by Thomas Jones in his paper for this conference, "Building Bridges: Cooperative Projects for the Humanities and Business."

My final remarks to the business community emphasize the importance of creating satisfying work for whoever turns to a business career. It must be acknowledged that humanities students have traditionally had little affection for business. In fiction and poetry, the businessman does not often appear as a hero. Nor in the history of philosophy is worldly success rated very high. The early Greek philosopher Thales is said to have bought up all the olive presses thus cornering the olive oil market and making himself a millionaire. Having proved that a philosopher could do it, the story goes, he gave up his wealth and went back to being a philosopher. Some professors of humanities probably do manifest anti-business sentiments, just as some businessmen look with suspicion at the fuzzy-heads in the Colleges of Liberal Arts. If there is anything to be gained from acknowledging such attitudes and behaviors, it may be that of accepting the necessity of making a business career attractive to those who don't already regard it so.

Research about the satisfactions and dissatisfactions workers find in their work offers some guidance here. An extensive sampling of college graduates by Lewis Solomon in the seventies is specifically applicable to the subject at hand. Very briefly, here are some of his findings: though holding jobs closely related to a major is regarded as important to job satisfactions, large numbers of workers find satisfactions

in unrelated jobs; humanities majors and young workers in corporate employment are less satisfied than other identifiable groups, but in all groups, job satisfactions increase with older workers; for all groups, there is a positive relationship between salary and job satisfaction. Perhaps the most important finding for our purposes is that whether or not skills are fully used is a more important predictor of job satisfaction than relationship of job to major. It may be as important that employers fully utilize the skills their employees possess as that education of college graduates has a tight fit with the anticipated job. It may be as important for business employers to be receptive to those who possess skills likely to be fully drawn upon in the course of a career as to concentrate on employees who appear to be trained to fit a specific job niche.

Finally, I think the present a good time to work toward greater understanding between humanities professors and business employers, both because students need jobs and professors need to bring their own attention back to essential human concerns. The Bush Foundation in St. Paul has been supporting faculty development programs in thirty colleges and universities in the Dakotas and Minnesota. One of the recent proposals had at its core an admirable response to assisting students of this traditional liberal arts college in finding jobs and in meeting needs of the surrounding business community. In brief, they proposed to bring students, faculty, and business and community leaders together in a series of exchanges during the year and in a longer two-week seminar during the summer. The aims of these meetings were to establish relationships between these groups, to acquaint business people with the specific skills the college's graduates did possess, to acquaint the college with the needs of business employers, and both to improve the college curriculum and enhance business employment as a consequence.

This conference and others like it within the past five years are encouraging signs of colleges and business employers getting together. The Modern Language Association's "Corporate Connections" program, albeit aimed at Ph.D.'s, moves in a useful direction. The appearance of various organizations devoted to defining and broadening the visibility and utility of the humanities is another good sign. Neither the National Endowment for the Humanities nor for the Arts existed a decade ago. The emphasis upon human resources and development in management is a phenomenon of the last

three decades. If necessity has forced more of our students to enter banks and corporate headquarters looking for jobs, it has also enabled business people to have a clearer idea of what kind of person a humanities graduate is. As I have placed writing at the center of what humanities has to offer, so I take heart that "writing across the disciplines" is now a movement of some size. Making writing a university-wide responsibility has placed some English professors in Colleges of Business or Engineering as Writing Consultants. A concern for ethics has played a somewhat similar role for philosophers. And now and then, business executives are given opportunities to return to academic settings and to renew acquaintance with subjects in the humanities. In short, necessity may have brought people together to talk about their common central human interests: having work that is satisfying, other people they can talk to, some things interesting to talk about. That does not take in all life, nor all of the humanities, but it does establish a common ground on which humanists and business people can get together to their mutual satisfaction and benefit.